

ENVOY GIVES ACCOUNT OF MEETING WITH CASTRO
BY GEORGE GEDDA
WASHINGTON

By Fidel Castro's count, the CIA has tried on 25 occasions to assassinate him.

Yet when Castro met secretly with Vernon Walters, a former deputy director of the CIA, for six hours 2 1/2 years ago, there was surprisingly little acrimony.

"It was very cordial," Walters recalled in an interview. "There was no sense of hostility. He has respect for people who believe in their ideals. He scorns Americans who are ashamed of being American."

Walters, who has served as ambassador-at-large for the past three years, met with Castro in Havana on March 5, 1982. It was a time when the United States, under strong pressure from Mexico, was trying to seek an accommodation with both Cuba and Nicaragua.

The American and Cuban governments agreed not to disclose that the meeting had taken place but word of it leaked out shortly afterward in Europe. Walters elaborated on the few details about the encounter that have filtered out.

Walters was the No. 2 official at the CIA from 1972-76, following the period in which the agency's attempts on Castro's life are alleged to have occurred. In contrast to Castro's claims, a Senate committee investigation 10 years ago concluded that the Cuban president was the target of eight CIA-sponsored assassination plots.

Walters said the meeting did not result in any narrowing of Cuban-American differences.

"He (Castro) held firm to his ideas," Walters said. "He made plain that he was an intellectually convinced communist, that he had been one since he was 17 years of age."

Some Cuba analysts believe Castro converted to Marxism after the revolution but Walters said he has no doubt that Castro's own account is the correct one.

Walters said Castro, at 21, was in Bogota, Colombia, in 1948 during a violent political uprising that coincided with a meeting of Organization of American States foreign ministers.

Ironically, Walters was there himself, serving as an aide to then Secretary of State George Marshall.

Castro, Walters said, "was on the radio exhorting people to break into the arms stores and take arms."

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WALTERS PROFILE
BY GEORGE GEDDA
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He flits furtively from capital to capital, a self-styled diplomatic "bird of passage." He can toss off anecdotes in eight languages about his days as a soldier, spy and special envoy, his dealings with DeGaulle, Churchill, Castro, MacArthur, Eisenhower, Nixon, Truman, Marshall.

Vernon Walters has known them all.

At an age when most people are slowing down, "Dick" Walters, 67, is speeding up, spending three days of every four on the road, or, more likely, in the air, going to and from meetings, usually unannounced, with kings, presidents and prime ministers.

His 6-foot-3-inch frame casts a big shadow, but somehow, he has managed to carry out most of his travels undetected.

No one in government, with the possible exception of diplomatic couriers, logs more time airborne than Walters, who became President Reagan's ambassador-at-large in 1981 after service as a three-star Army general and deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency. He has translated for four presidents.

His linguistic skills, honed during his schoolboy education in Europe, are legendary. Once, when President Nixon delivered a 10-minute toast to a West German official, the interpreter became incapacitated. Walters came to the rescue with an impromptu translation that the Germans said was flawless.

Walters is a travel agent's dream. Since joining the administration, he has visited 95 countries. This year, he has averaged more than 10,000 miles a week in the air — 300,000 miles, or 60,000 miles more than the distance between the Earth and the moon.

In one eight-day, eye-glazing exercise in tedium, he had six flights of more than seven hours each: Washington-South America-Africa-Europe-Los Angeles-Europe-Washington.

So where does this jut-jawed jet-setter go and whom does he see on these journeys? Only about one trip in four is known outside the State Department because Walters believes discreet contacts are more likely to produce results.

When his feet are not firmly planted in the air, Walters occupies a modest sixth-floor office at the State Department.

Walters, for the most part, won't say which countries he has visited, allowing only that some of his trips would raise eyebrows if they were disclosed. Only rarely, however, is he the bearer of good news.

"I am not sent (on trips) if success is likely," he said in a rare interview. "Local authorities take care of the easy problems. One of my chief tasks is administering extreme unction, just before the patient dies."

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